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SIX PROPOSITIONS

FRANKLIN MERRELL-WOLFF

An Intellectual History of Contemporary Anti-Intellectualism in America

Dave Vliegenthart

[1] Social crises have typically contributed to a loss of traditional meaning.

Social crises, such as a war, have often been accompanied by a loss of conventional meaning and a subsequent search for alternative meaning, in late modern North American culture. After the Civil War and the First and Second World War, for instance, a large part of the American people increasingly criticized the dualism and dogmatism of dominant (Christian) religions and the materialism and rationalism of mainstream (Newtonian) science, in search of other sources of meaning.

[2] Modern “seekers” find new meaning in secular-religious spiritualities.

The search for meaning has steered many modern American “seekers” away from mainstream western science and religion towards an individualized combination of “other,” often occult or oriental, religious and secular traditions. These typically modern ideologies are arguably best described as “secular-religious spiritualities.”

[3] Competition among new (age) religions has contributed to an intellectualization of anti-intellectual claims by their founders and followers.

A rise (in awareness) of similar charismatic gurus with similar new (age) religions founded on similar secular-religious spiritualities has repeatedly forced founders and followers of these emergent traditions to intellectually revise and refine their anti-intellectual idea(l)s, in order to create and sustain their own “unique” identity.

[4] Founders and followers of new (age) religions have resorted to auto/biographical texts and talks, to create and sustain a “unique” identity.

Given the growing (awareness of) similarities of their secular-religious spiritualities, contemporary “satsang” gurus and seekers have taken an “auto/biographical turn” from a *philosophical* to a more *psychological* intellectualization, in order to create and sustain their own “unique” identity, by adding a more personal touch.

- [5] **Franklin Merrell-Wolff (1887-1985) is a typical example of a modern American guru of a new (age) religion who has intellectualized their anti-intellectual claim to revelation or realization via increasingly auto/biographical texts and talks, to create and sustain a “unique” identity.**

The life and teaching of Franklin Merrell-Wolff and his Assembly of Man are a good example of a modern American guru and their new (age) religion or emergent tradition that is based on a secular-religious spirituality. They, too, present us with an anti-intellectual claim to a revelation or realization, on the one hand, which has been intellectually revised and refined, on the other, to differentiate their identity from similar idea(l)s of similar movements of similar charismatic satsang teachers.

- [6] **The intellectualizations of anti-intellectual claims or “reasoned flights beyond reason” of modern gurus like Franklin Merrell-Wolff reflect the continuing significance of religion and theology in America, today.**

Contrary to common belief, there have been no “flights from reason” in modern metaphysical religion. Nor has this secular-religious discourse shown signs of significant decline. Instead, there have been “*reasoned flights beyond reason*.” These increasing intellectualizations of anti-intellectual revelations or realizations of charismatic leaders entail a type of (popular) theological reflection. This shows the changing-yet-enduring presence and relevance of religion and theology in America.